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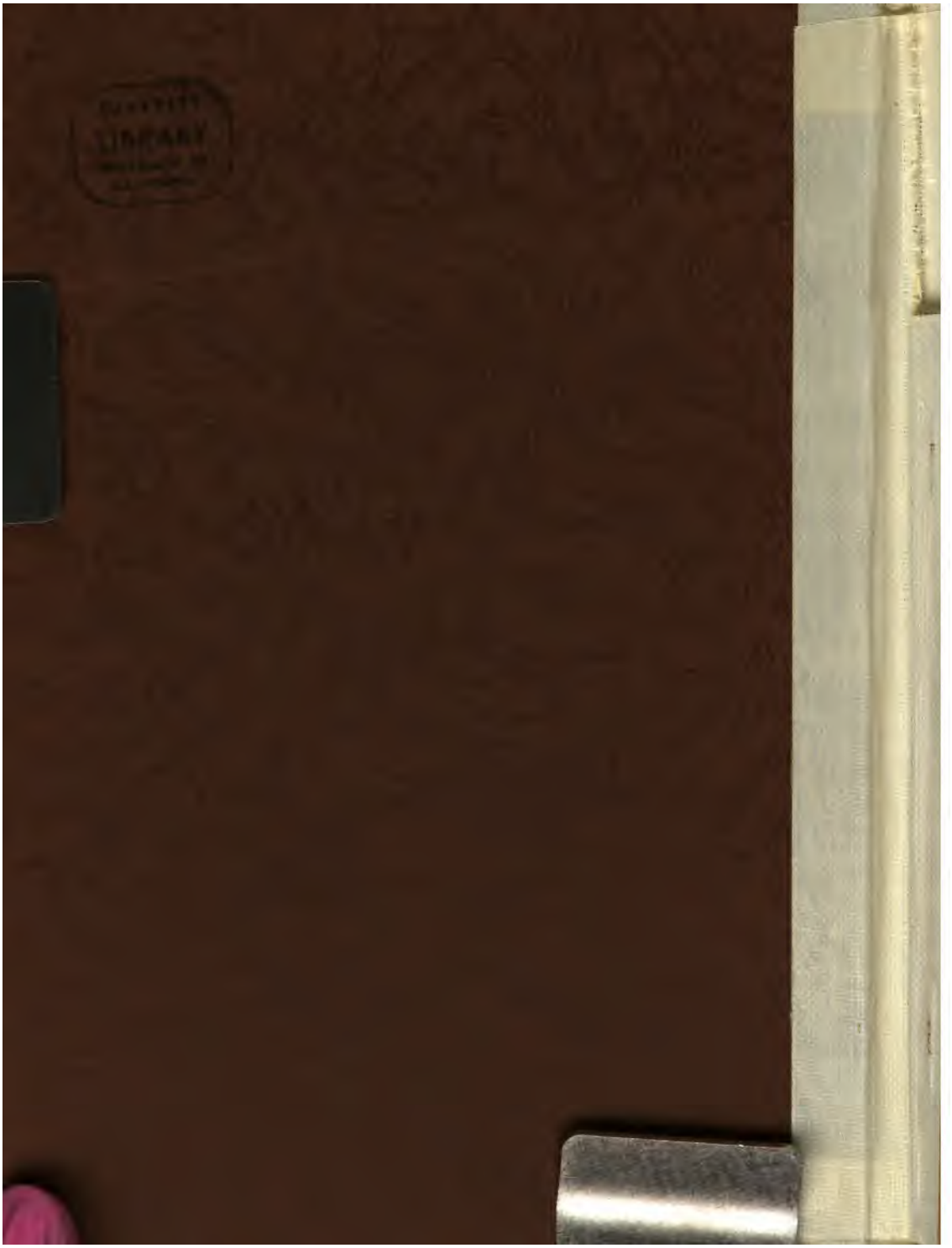

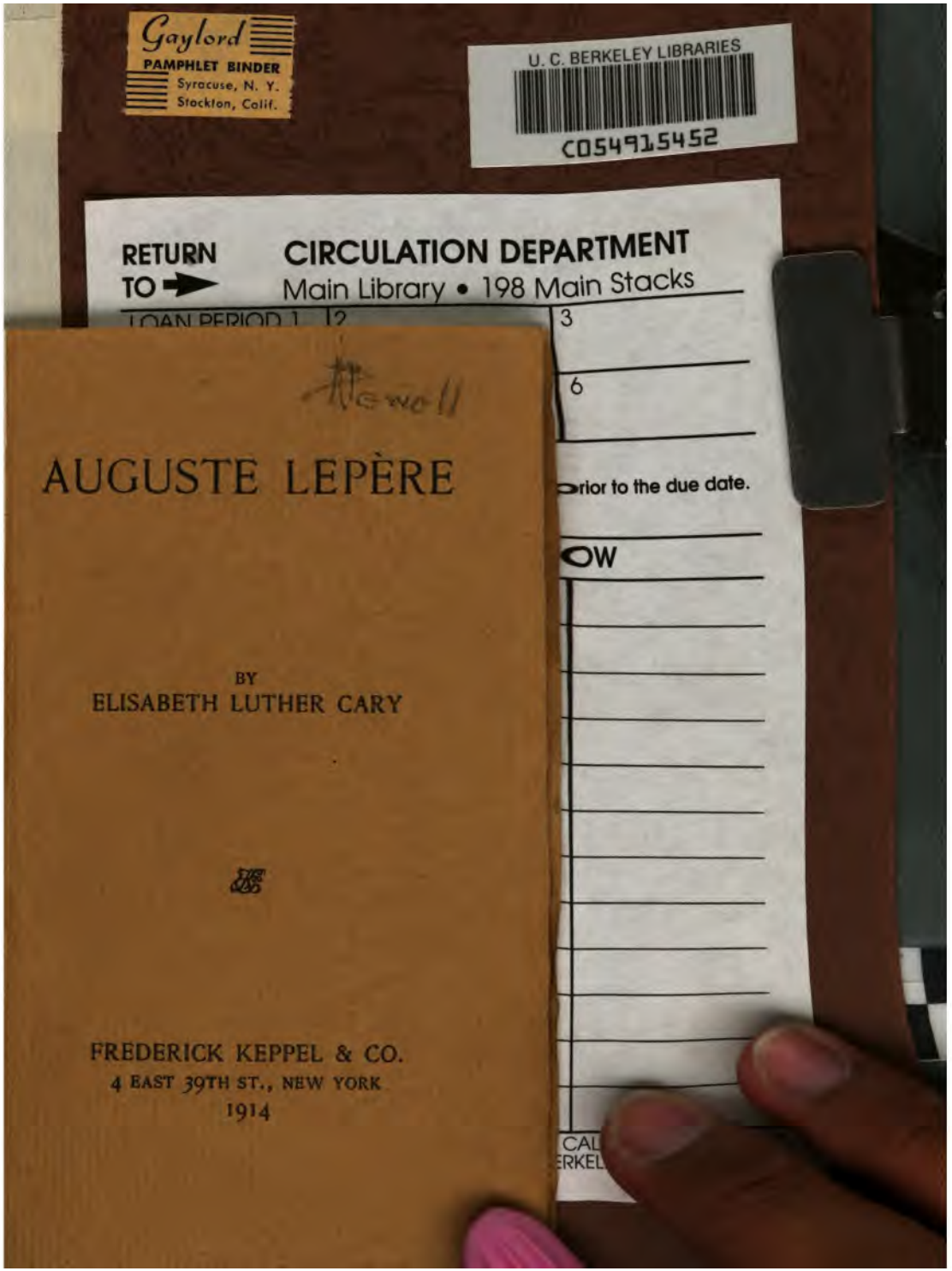
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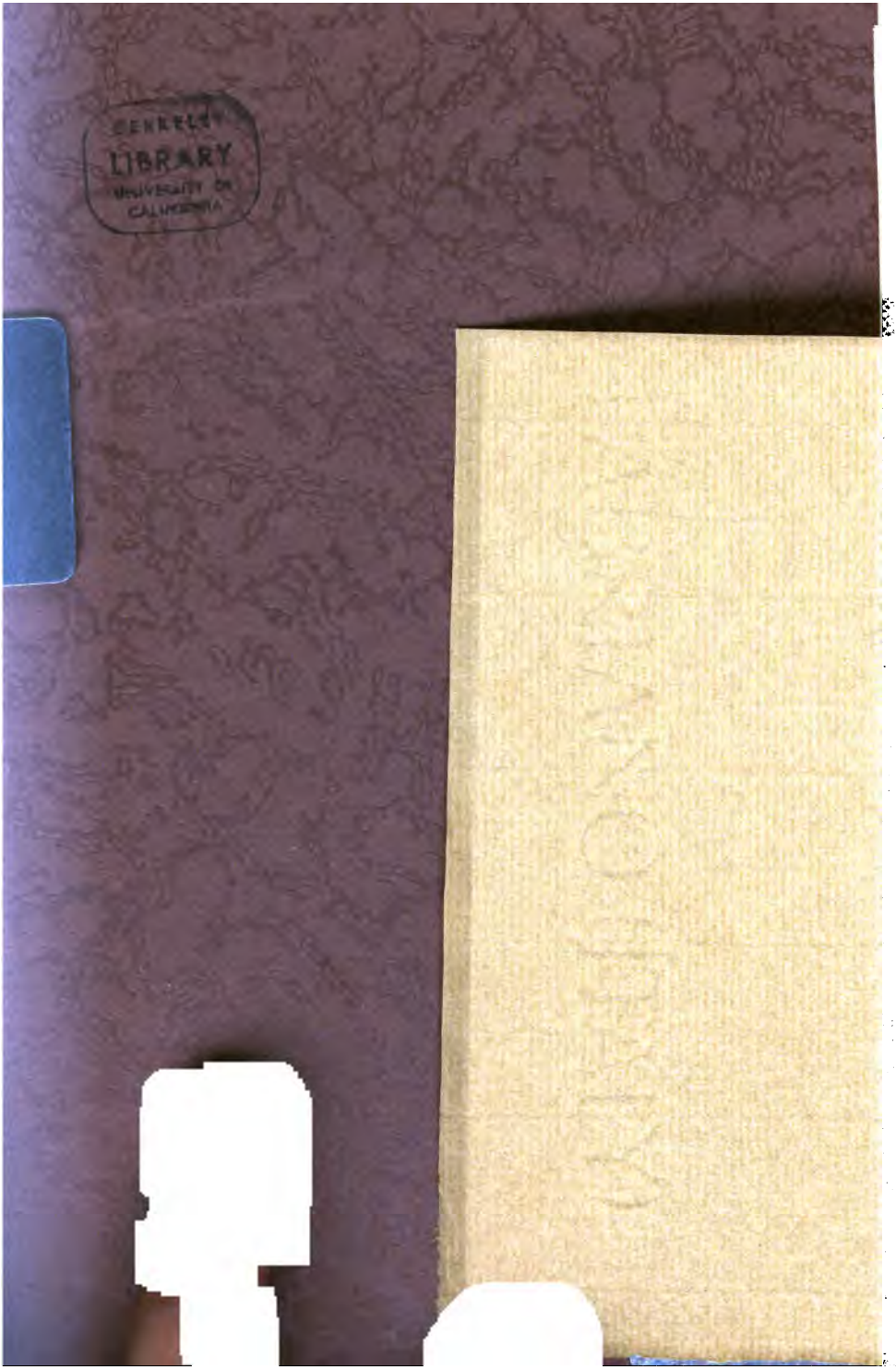
ELISABETH LUTHER CARY

FREDERICK KEPPEL & CO.
4 EAST 39TH ST., NEW YORK
1914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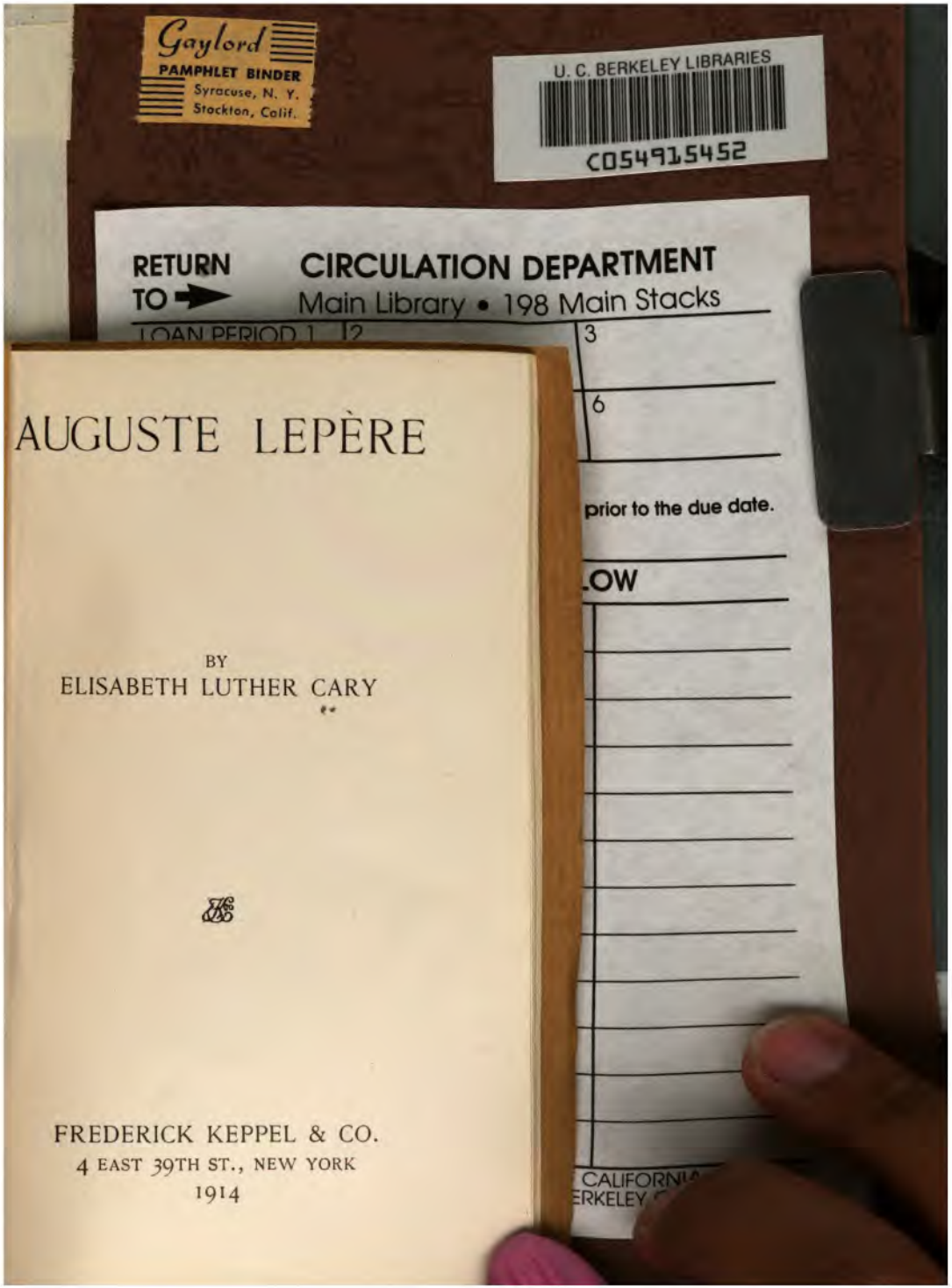
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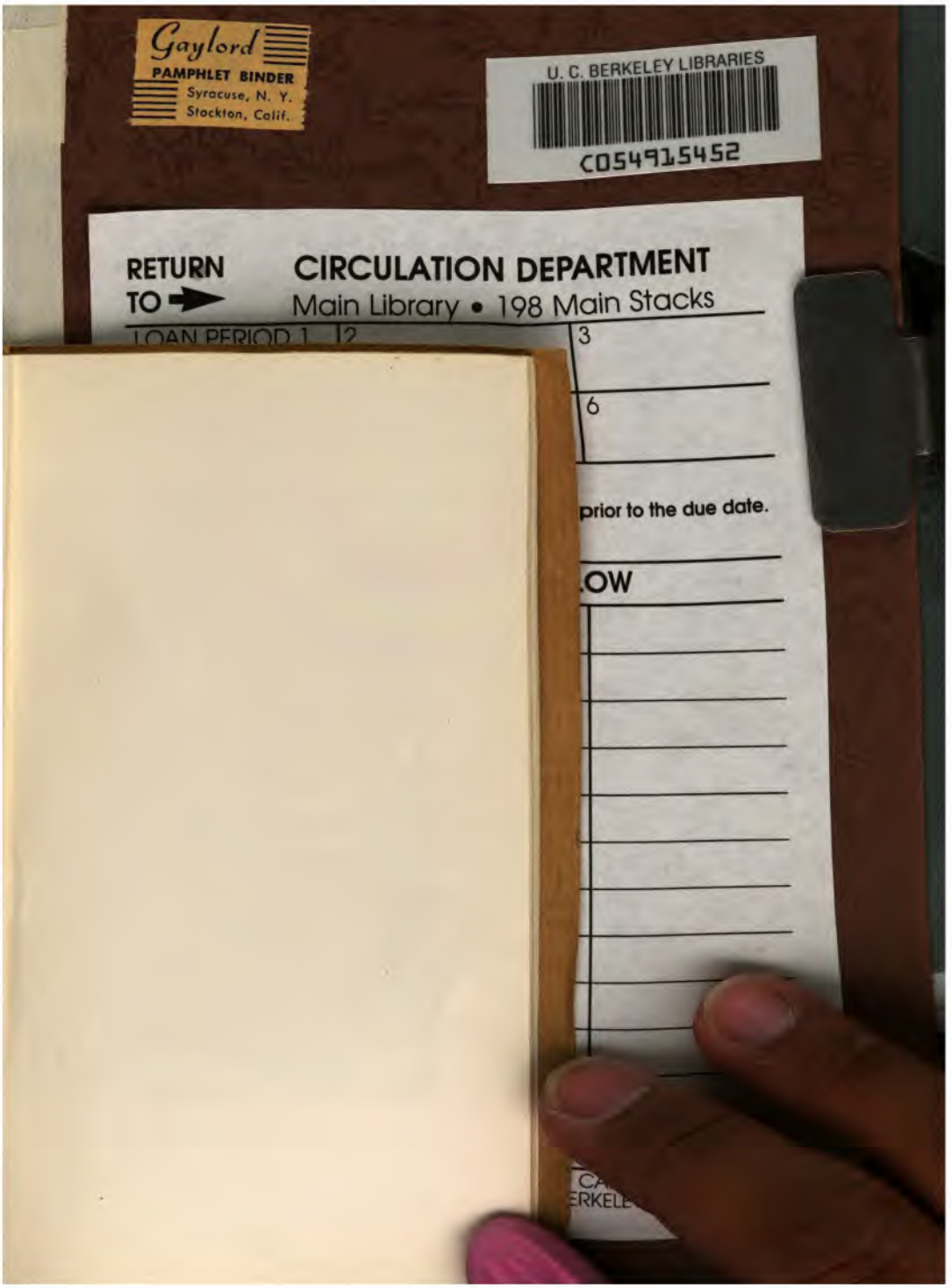
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Cathédrale d'Amiens, Journée d'Inventaire

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AUGUSTE LEPÈRE

BY

ELISABETH LUTHER CARY

IT is the fashion of the moment to specialize in art as in other professions, and we no longer expect to find the multiple tendencies and ambitions of a Leonardo or a Dürer, or even of the self-contained Rembrandt, in the modern artist. He is a painter or a sculptor or a wood-engraver or an etcher. He is even more closely classified as a portrait- or a landscape-painter, an animalier or a decorator, a dry-point engraver or a disciple of pure etching. If, as sometimes happens, he escapes from the threads of the Lilliputians and swings his arms in a wider sweep, it is in the mood of deprecation or excuse, as a writer may choose to whittle wood or hammer metal in order to clear his word-fogged brain.

There is, however, a wholesome and growing impression among thoughtful observers that extreme limitation and restric-

tion produce weakness rather than strength, and when we find an artist who has something of the ancient flexibility of mind and hand it is worth our while to acclaim him.

Auguste Lepère has pursued a free course of development, rounding his capacities, and forming himself with balanced and reasonable attention to diversified interests. He was born in Paris in 1849. His father was the talented sculptor François Lepère, and he got, no doubt, from his father something of the latter's taste for suggesting passion, even frenzy, in small but monumental figures. While quite young he studied with the English engraver Smeeton, and spent his first professional years in the service of illustration for *Le Monde Illustré, L'Illustration, Le Magasin Pittoresque,* and *La Revue Illustrée* in Paris, the *Graphic* and *Black and White* in London, and *Scribner's* and *Harper's* in America.

Tiring of this field, he tried all things. He became in turn a metal-chaser, a decorator of leathers, a ceramist, an etcher, a wood-engraver and a painter. If we consider him chiefly as an etcher, it must be with the full appreciation that any craft mastered by him is made subsidiary to the

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larger principles upon which all works of art are based, whatever the medium or process. He has consistently declined to fritter away his admirable technique upon technicalities undertaken for their own sake, and his work in etching as in painting is the work of an intellect concerned with the problems of rhythm and harmony, color, tone and form, which assail artists in every field.

As an etcher he received his initiation from Bracquemond, the most robust of temperaments and at the same time the most fastidious of technicians. Lepère has been worthy of his teaching. From the first he has sought to render his impression, recorded by a vision singularly prompt and synthetic, with precise care, patiently assembling all the complex virtues of his method to the task. To his slightest plate he has brought conscience and sincerity, and also a quality without which all the moral gifts with which human nature may be endowed would have availed him nothing as an artist: the rare capacity, that is, for retaining the freshness of his vision throughout a slow process of translation.

In one phrase is summed up the essential

L'Eglise de Jouy-le-Moutier

aim of the engraver who treats his art with respect, whether he uses it for purposes of reproduction or for original work: "Not to imitate. To express."

Lepère has followed his own doctrine to its logical conclusion. Never servile, even in his most faithful portraiture of a nature that enchants him, he works with a plenitude of science, but also with unwearied freshness of inspiration and a sympathetic feeling for the character of his subject,

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whether it is a curve of the river near Nôtre Dame where horses come down to drink, or a poor man's hut with climbing vines in bloom, or the wide marshes of the Vendée. With the passage of time his vision has grown larger and calmer, his interpretations magisterial; but in his most classic moments he does not forget to infuse into his composition a strong feeling for this intimate characterization. He is a true creator, living not only above but in his conception. He is at once serene and moved, in command of his intellectual instrument and impelled by his personal interest.

The *Journée d'Inventaire* is a plate that shows clearly this double action of the artist's mind. The composition is stately in both line and mass. In the background rises the lofty architecture of the Amiens Cathedral; in the foreground, in deep shadow, is a group of figures diversely occupied. The upraised arms of these figures lead naturally to the pointed arches and ascending spires. In a similar fashion, the strong darks of the foreground mount in diminishing quantity through the heavy shadows in the recesses of the doorways to the luminous blacks that mark the slender openings in the

towers. It is a beautiful upward movement that repeats the song of the Gothic spirit.

These wonderful darks have also another function. Echoed as they are, in the small, sharp shadows of the multitudinous detail, they send the light quivering all through the picture. It pours down from a sky empty of clouds, and causes the web of decorative imagery with which the structure is draped to shimmer like a fabric set with precious stones. Only a true master of the subtleties possible to interwoven dark and light could thus command his atmospheric effect, and evoke from his slight and restricted materials the grandeur of the immense pile of stone raised by the hands of man, and the contrasting evanescence of the passing sunshine caressing every boss and hollow in the richly manipulated surfaces. It is perhaps not too much to say that nothing more remarkable in its kind has been done in the present century. The element of drama is added by the turmoil of little figures in shadow at the base of the cathedral, seen in minute detail through the translucent darkness and agitated by their human accidents and emotions. The whole spirit of France, its imperishable monu-

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Le Ballon qui tombe

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Belle Matinée d'Automne

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ments, its sparkle of sunshine, its reasonable architecture, its vivid life, may be inferred from this remarkable plate.

Very different in sentiment and less close to perfection in the relation of the parts of the design to the whole, is *La Chûte de Ballon;* yet this also is a beautiful plate. As in the *Journée d'Inventaire,* the eye is led upward by the gestures of the crowd in the foreground to the point of interest, the balloon hung poised above the trees and houses. There is the same contrast of movement, too, in the agitated figures of the foreground with the calm lines and clear light of the distance. In this plate, however, is greater piquancy of light and shade. The abrupt lines and minor episodes are carried so far into the composition as to dominate the general impression, leaving the open distance to play a secondary instead of primary part. Figures are hurrying in excitement toward the scene of the aërial drama; tree branches are tossing, there are little restless clouds passing rapidly across the sky; the air is brisk, it is a bright day, there is much to see and do, and interest is keen—that is the story one carries away from the handsome, stirring print, and also a subtle poetic suggestion

that beyond the town, as one follows the slow length of a white cliff, to where it meets the horizon, is a very great world that turns from night to day, from day to night, interminably, unchecked and unspeeded by the passing storms of human glee and human woe.

La Seine à l'Embouchure du Canal Saint-Martin is more commonplace in subject, the river and its barges having entered into the artistic life of nearly all French etchers; but how few could pass with such sureness of plan, such precision of execution, from the dark bulk of the vessel in the lower left corner to the snapping black of the tree-top in the upper right corner, along a perfect diagonal, without a suspicion of stiffness or formalism in the fluent arrangement of innumerable details of pattern! This strong sense of appropriate and austere design, supported by such an easy grace of handling, is unusual in any age, and especially in our own, when grace and austerity find it almost impossible to live together in one man's work.

Turning away from these subjects, in which nature presents a wide range to the artist and inspires him to breadth and dig-

While all these plates are admirably expressive, one in particular, *Le Nid,* seems to me filled with melody, color and charm as well as with the efficient intelligence always to be found in Lepère's work. A little solid house with thick walls stands in greenery. Children, natural, happy, unconcerned, are playing in the foreground. Beyond is a curve of low hill and a glimpse of flat plain; and still beyond, a little town with its spire. It is all very naïve and fresh; the outdoor setting has much beauty; the types of the children are unhackneyed; the gestures and positions unconventional and spontaneous. A mere glance reveals the felicity of the subject-matter, but longer acquaintance is necessary before all the resources of the design are appreciated. Even in this playful note of pleasant summer pastime we get something of the gravity and serious purpose indispensable to great etchers as to great painters. It was this characteristic that led Lepère to pull down all the detail of the middle distance below the noble swinging line of the hillock, in order to keep the severity of that magnificent curve. It was this which led him to follow a repeating curve in the arrange-

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Promenade du Dimanche

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ment and environment of the children, apparently so carelessly disposed among their shrubs and flowers. "Let all things play and bloom and make holiday," he seems to exclaim in this rare plate, "so long as the power of my design is not weakened by them." The artist whose work says that to us is sure of long life in our memories.

There are several of these subjects in which children at play near their homes are the principal feature, and it would be easy to find in each some special note of gaiety and charm and quick Gallic wit. In *Les Deux Bourrines,* for example, the groups of little ugly creatures, who form again a curved line of beauty, are characterized with a frank acceptance of their unclassic physiognomies that would have delighted the heart of Daumier. *Le Nid de Pauvres* is not less romantic in its Gothic avoidance of the ideal type.

Classic Lepère can be, however, with a curiously vital appreciation of what the living classic must have been. He has an etching of a swineherd entering the yard in which the beasts are penned. They move, grunting, toward him. Outside is a cluster of great trees with bushy foliage. The light

is clear and warm. The folds of the swineherd's mantle and his gesture are Greek. His figure might have passed across the Athenian stage, one fancies, at the time of Sophoclean drama. And the landscape has the deep repose immortalized in classic verse—such songs as in his extreme old age Sophocles made to do honor to his native village:

Our home, Colonus, gleaming fair and white:
The nightingale still haunteth all our woods,
  Green with the flush of spring;
  And sweet, melodious floods
Of softest song through grove and thicket
    ring.

Lepère is not often found in this mood, however, and the swineherd plate cannot be considered wholly characteristic of his temper of mind. It seems to have been one of those rare happenings when the mind is lifted above its habitual plane, occasion serves, and the trained hand obediently records a moment of peculiar exaltation. He is perhaps most of all his daily self in the little plate called *Le Moulin des Chapelles*. Here he shows us the machinery of the mill and the round white column of the struc-

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Été de Saint-Martin, "La Noce qui passe"

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ture as others have done, but he also shows us what others seldom do—the use of the mill. A patient horse is standing near, a man is shifting the bags of flour to his back. It is not a mere accident of landscape; it has a social and utilitarian function; it is connected with human life.

This is the most characteristic attitude of mind for an artist so alert to the significance of visible things; and it is immensely to his credit as an artist that he almost never permits this keen and throbbing interest in the world about him to trespass upon his logical use of his great instrument.

If organization of line and space, ability to establish in each of his compositions a decorative scheme adequate to support easily all the delightful episodes and figures which he chooses to introduce, is the most important element in Lepère's artistic equipment, the next in significance is the clarity and precision of his utterance. There is no vapor in his imagination; he is a poet as well as an artist, with a poet's sensitiveness to definition of form. All that he lacks is the intensity of emotion that sweeps away interest in everything but the personal feeling. We suspect that the world for him

will always be "full of a number of things," and that he will not be able to forget any of them in the exaltation of profound self-absorption. But he has a genius for infusing a rich suggestiveness into all that he observes, and for giving his narrative an epic character.

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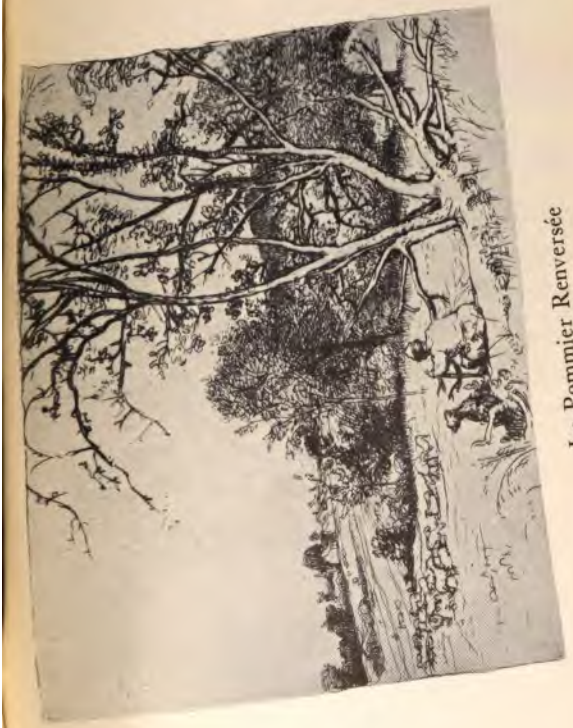

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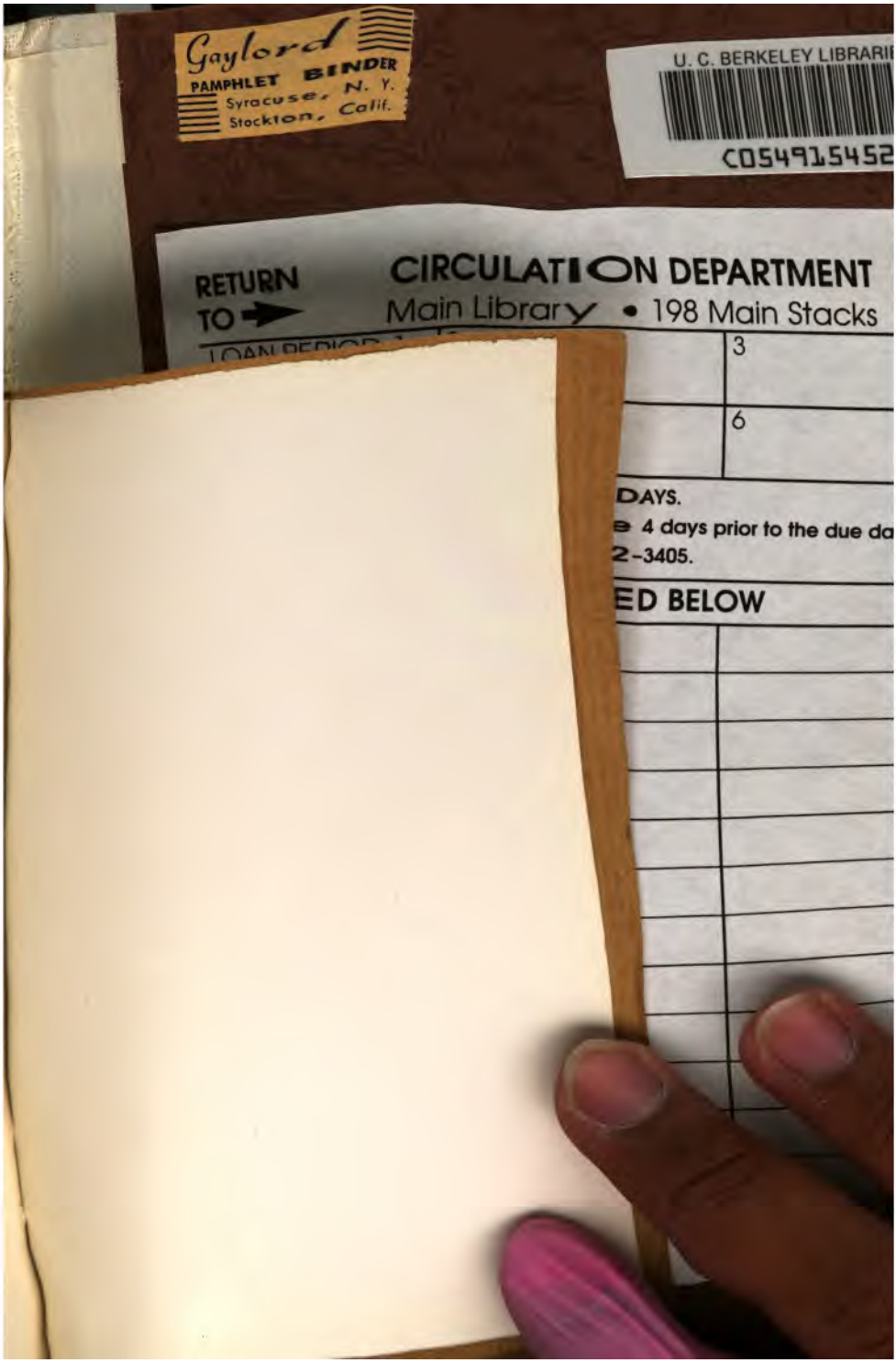
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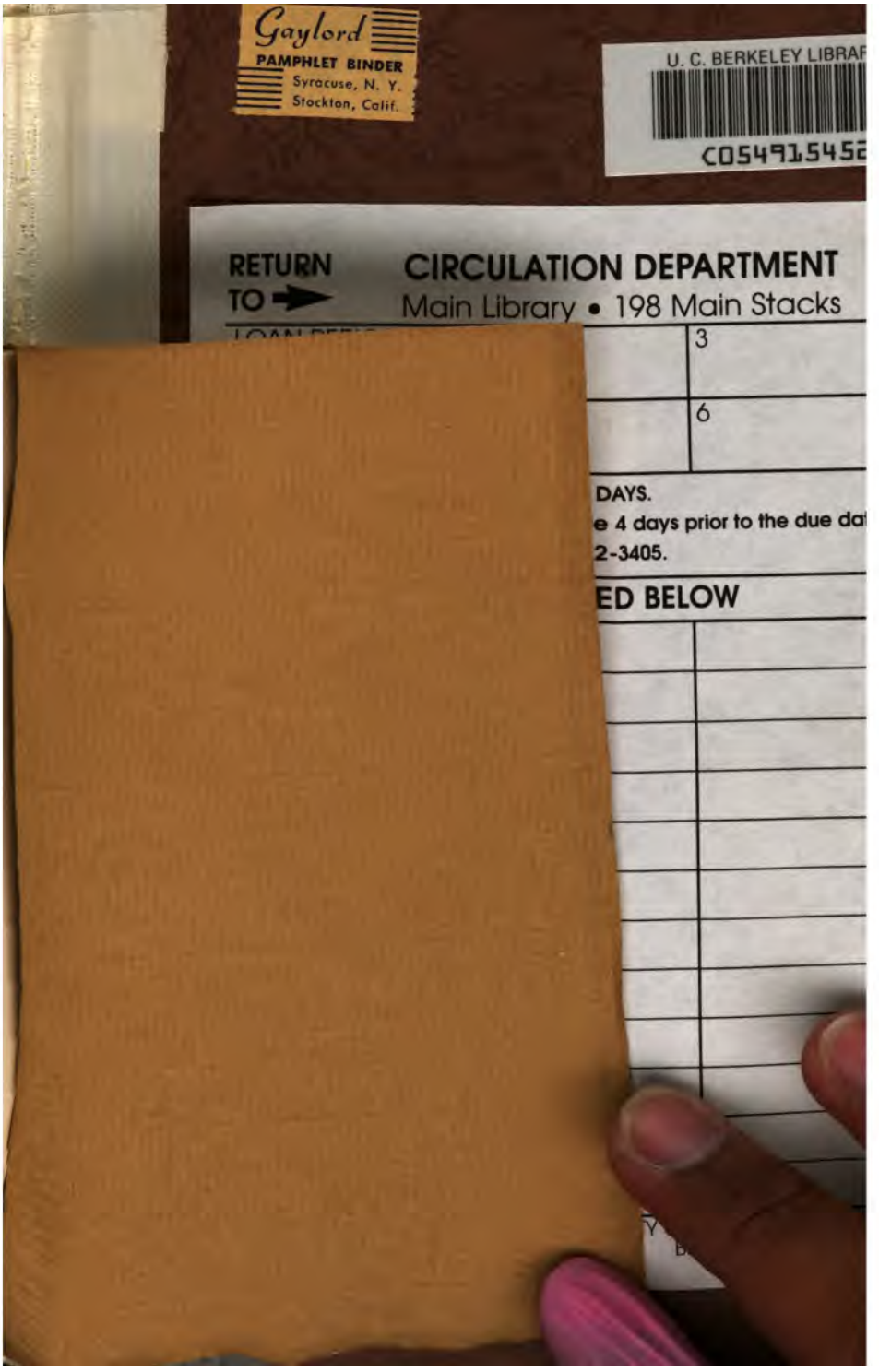
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